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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 JEDDAH 000430

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RIYADH, PLEASE PASS TO DHAHRAN; DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP;
DEPARTMENT FOR DRL/IRF - PLEASE PASS TO AMBASSADOR-AT-LARGE
JOHN HANFORD; PARIS FOR ZEYA; LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/19/2016

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [KIRF](#) [SA](#)

SUBJECT: CHRISTIAN WORSHIP IN SAUDI ARABIA: ETHIOPIAN &
ERITREAN CHRISTIANS ARRESTED AND DETAINED IN JEDDAH

REF: A. JEDDAH 237

[1](#)B. JEDDAH 308

[1](#)C. JEDDAH 328

[1](#)D. JEDDAH 346

Classified By: Consul General Tatiana Gfoeller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY. The Consul General and ConGenOffs are conducting a long-term inquiry into Christian worship in Jeddah (reftel). Recently, AmConGen Jeddah learned that four Ethiopian and Eritrean Christians were arrested and detained on June 9 when they were worshipping at "Faith Rhema Church", a Protestant Evangelical church in Jeddah. ConGenOff was able to speak with the Church's pastor, Mekbeb Telahun, who is currently being held at Breman prison in Jeddah. ConGenOff spoke with Pastor Telahun on his mobile phone, which he has been permitted to retain while incarcerated. Pastor Telahun confirmed initial reports provided to AmConGen Jeddah by DRL/IRF about his own arrest and the arrest and detention of one of his church's elders and two teachers. (NOTE: Consul General met with one of the two detained teachers in December 2005 for an unrelated matter.) The pastor further reported that the Ethiopian Consulate in Jeddah is working on their case. He was not immediately concerned for his personal safety and suggested that he was not being mistreated by Saudi prison officers. Pastor Telahun's greatest concern is being deported back to Ethiopia. END SUMMARY.

INITIAL REPORT FROM DRL/IRF CONTACT

[1](#)2. (C) On June 13, AmConGen Jeddah received an initial report from DRL/IRF that stated that four Ethiopian and Eritrean Christian worshipers had been arrested on Friday, June 9th at an Ethiopian/Eritrean Christian worship service being held in a private building near the Indian Consulate in Jeddah. The report further stated that approximately 300 to 250 Christians were worshipping together at the time that approximately twenty "Saudi 'security' men with sticks" and without uniforms entered the building as the congregation was praying and singing. While the Saudis came in shouting at the congregation, they were largely ignored by the worshipers "because it was during the time of praise and worship and prayer". The Saudi security men then sat down with the other worshipers to listen to the prayer and an interpreter was brought forward by the church leaders to translate the sermon into Arabic.

13. (C) According to the report, which was obtained by a DRL/IRF source in Saudi Arabia, the "security men" told the entire congregation to leave the building, except for one pastor, one elder, and two teachers. The four men identified were Pastor Mekbeb Telahun, Elder Fekre Gebremedhin, Teacher Dawit Okbe, and Teacher Messay Yewondwossen. While no one was physically harmed during the raid, the security forces ransacked the building and confiscated Christian books and money that they found. When the raid was over, the security men took the keys to the rented building, turned off the electricity, and locked the door. When some worshipers returned to the building the next day, security forces were there and told them never to come back.

REPORT CONFIRMED

14. (C) On June 19, ConGenOff was able to obtain the name of the church to which Pastor Telahun belongs. It is a well-established and well-organized "store front" church in Jeddah called "Faith Rhema Church". ConGenOff was also able to obtain the pastor's mobile phone number. Much to her surprise, when ConGenOff called the number, Pastor Telahun himself answered the phone. Understanding that this was not a secure line, ConGenOff identified herself to Pastor Telahun as a representative of AmConGen Jeddah and, without referencing his arrest or the information she had been provided, asked him how he was doing. Without prompting, Pastor Telahun proceeded to confirm the initial reports provided by DRL/IRF as outlined above. He spoke freely, though in a soft tone, and explained that he was permitted to keep his mobile phone while in jail.

15. (C) Pastor Telahun further confirmed that he was being

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held at Breman prison in Jeddah and had been there for approximately eight days. He was previously with the other three detainees at a local police station for the first three days after their arrest and then for one day at what he described as "a secret police station". Pastor Telahun confirmed that the other three detainees were being held at "Tarheel Prison #3" in Jeddah. He did not indicate whether or not he had spoken to them directly. When asked specifically by ConGenOff, the pastor said that he was not being mistreated in prison, but added that he was worried about being deported back to Ethiopia. He said that someone from the Ethiopian Consulate General in Jeddah had come to see him and was working on his case. ConGenOff did not ask any further questions.

16. (C) NOTE. The initial report from DRL/IRF to AmConGen Jeddah about the above-detailed arrests has not been confirmed by any other independent sources, but ConGenOff has no reason to doubt Pastor Telahun's testimony. Please advise post if any further action is required. END NOTE.

AN UNOFFICIAL RAID?

17. (C) DRL/IRF's initial report from its source inside Saudi Arabia indicated that the raid on Faith Rhema might not have been officially sanctioned by the government because the week before the raid, on June 2, "uniformed government officers" had come to services with mutowah (religious police), had seen them worshipping, and told the church that "they were fine" before departing the premises. Pastor Telahun did not refer to this point and so it remains unconfirmed. DRL/IRF contact's initial report also indicated that the detainees were particularly concerned about being deported and returned to their home countries of Ethiopia and Eritrea where they would also face charges for practicing Christianity and likely be incarcerated. While ConGenOff did not directly confirm this with the pastor during their conversation, this is consistent with his statement that he was worried about being deported.

18. (C) COMMENT. It is unclear to post why Pastor Telahun or the other men would be concerned about facing further retribution in Ethiopia for being practicing Christians, particularly given the fact that Christian Evangelical groups are on the rise in Ethiopia. We can only speculate that the pastor would be identified as belonging to a splinter Protestant group and, therefore, is concerned about reprisal in Ethiopia. That said, it is more likely that these men fear deportation because they are gainfully employed in Saudi Arabia and, more importantly, because they are fully committed to "spreading the Christian word of God" in Saudi Arabia. END COMMENT.

CG MET ETHIOPIAN TEACHER IN DECEMBER 2005

19. (C) The Consul General met with Messay Yewondwossen, one of the two detained teachers, in December 2005 when he applied for a job on her household staff. He is a tall but very unassuming and gentle young Ethiopian man who, in soft-spoken words, confided in the CG that his main purpose for being in Saudi Arabia is to serve "the church". Unmarried, Mr. Yewondwossen discussed at length his commitment to his fellow worshipers and presented a letter of reference from Pastor Telahun on Faith Rhema Church letterhead. Mr. Yewondwossen was then working as a salesman in Jeddah for a local trade establishment. He was looking for an alternative, as his Saudi employer often failed to pay him for work performed for weeks on end. He expressed his indifference about the particular job he would do at the Consulate, so long as it kept him in Jeddah where he could continue his work with the church and provided him with a minimal salary to support his basic needs.

Gfoeller